



Miller, Nancy K. "On Being Wrong." *Profession* 2008: 54-65.

Reproduced with permission of the MLA.

[www.nancykmiller.com](http://www.nancykmiller.com)

## *On Being Wrong*

---

NANCY K. MILLER

It was early in the fall semester of 1985, and I was lying in bed reading the *New Yorker*. During most of the 1980s I ran the Women's Studies Program at Barnard College and taught there. But I also taught on occasion in the graduate school at Columbia, where I had studied French during the high theory days of the 1970s. I had been leafing through the magazine on a Friday night trying to relax, when my eye was caught by a story that began in the following way: "It was easy to find an apartment in New Haven, even though my classes in feminist criticism were starting in just a few days and most of the other grad students had arrived at Yale the week before" (Janowitz 30). Hey, I elbowed my husband, who was reading on the other side of the bed. A story in the *New Yorker* by a woman writer about feminist criticism. I sat bolt upright in amazement.

Then feminist criticism disappeared for a while, until well into the third page of the story, when the narrator, a young woman named Cora, after supplying some family background for the reader (a dead sister, a father living in New Zealand), mentions that she had been accepted into the Women's Studies Program at Yale. I was newly excited. But not, as it turned out, for long. "I was sitting in class, taking notes as usual," the narrator complains about her seminar in feminist criticism, "when it became apparent that not one word that was being said made the slightest bit of sense" (32).

More than twenty years after the fact, it's hard for me to slow down my initial reaction enough to replicate it here. I confess that I had been

---

*The author is distinguished professor of English and comparative literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.*

---

so enchanted by the prospect of reading about a feminist criticism class at Yale (Yale!) that I temporarily lost my critical cool. Hadn't I been taught to distinguish the sign from the referent? literature from the thing itself? All training flew out the bedroom window as I read on, enraptured. "The teacher, Anna Castleton" (who could that be?), "a well-padded, grayish woman with clipped-poodle hair" (that doesn't sound like Margaret Homans, the one feminist professor at Yale I could think of), "was discussing a conference she had attended the week before—a Poetics of Gender colloquium—where she was severely attacked for her presentation" (32). No, wait, that's not Margaret Homans, I thought, my readerly pleasure sliding into heart-pounding paranoia. Well-padded? Poodle hair? It sounded like me. But wait, I struggled for sanity—this doesn't make sense. The Poetics of Gender conference had taken place at Columbia in the fall of 1984—I ran the conference, I hadn't been attacked, and no one fitting that—my?—description had been either. On the other hand, the laundry list of notes composed by the student narrator did ring true:

Status of empirical discourse.

Post-structuralist account of dissolving subject precludes formation of female identity.

The notion of the subject in progress.

It was assumed she was calling for a return to fixed identity.

Post-gendered subjectivities.

If gender is constructed, a gendered identity ninety-nine per cent of the time is built onto person who has a sex. (32)

If on the page of the magazine the words sounded excruciatingly familiar, it was because I remembered having spoken them, or words like them, at the Feminism/Theory/Politics conference held at the Pembroke Center the previous spring.<sup>1</sup> My talk had been about authorship, female authorship after the famous "death of the author" argument, taking as my example Charlotte Brontë's feisty feminist heroine Lucy Snowe; I had ended on what I meant to be an ironic turn inspired by the novel.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, my irony badly misfired, and a member of the audience, a young British theorist famous for her poststructuralist views, stood up and denounced me in a statement she had managed to take the time to write out. Her words and her tone left me gasping. In the *New Yorker* story version of the conference, what happened to the feminist professor, according to the heroine's seminar notes (reproduced as such in the story), was that "without using the word 'class,' she argued for a more complicated view of women as historical subject. Yet she was attacked for this—brutally attacked" (32). And in a brief, disingenuous flash of sympathy, the narrator

speculates about what the professor might have felt: “I wondered whether the teacher had burst into tears following the attack on her. The two hours of class were devoted to a retelling of the attack in this language which so gracefully circled a subject without ever landing to make a point” (33). I had not cried at the event at the Pembroke Center. I was too shocked for tears. But I was forced to admit then that women, feminists, could be as violent toward one another as any men in academia. In the seminar I was teaching that semester, I had talked about my disillusionment.

Recalling the scene as I read in bed, I did feel like crying, though, because it was clear that the writer of the story was taking no hostages either and that what I thought was so wonderful—a story about feminist criticism in the *New Yorker*—was the opposite of wonderful. All the more so because it was written by a woman, Tama Janowitz, a young writer who had already received a great deal of thrilled literary attention, although it was only the following year, when her story collection *Slaves of New York* appeared, that she attained celebrity as a female member of the literary brat pack. I hated the author’s portrait of me. Was it true? Had I not even made my point? My mortification deepened. I was not only a pathetic, jargon-ridden joke in the eyes of the student narrator, I had big hips and bad hair. I got out of bed and poured myself a serious drink.

But the story—of reading the *New Yorker* story—isn’t over yet. Once I (likened in Cora’s notebook doodle to a “beaver, paddling frantically, with a tree stump clutched in its large buckteeth” [32]) had been dispatched to utter ridicule, the narrator turned the spotlight on herself, on the presentation she had made in the same seminar later in the semester, an oral report on “mysticism and Eastern philosophy and some of the similar themes that emerge in the writings of Virginia Woolf” (33). I actually remembered the presentation quite vividly and recalled that it wasn’t in fact the author, whom I had begun in my mind’s eye to see in her place around the seminar table, but another young woman in the class who had discussed Woolf and Eastern mysticism. As I began to revisit the scene in memory, I slowly realized that this story was not going to be just about me. “I had hoped to please the teacher,” Cora confesses. “Throughout my report she wrote furiously in a notebook.” And, she goes on, “when I finished, she looked up and said, ‘You’re wrong’” (33). By then I was not only wide awake, I was shocked again, although in an entirely different way. For one thing, I now had to recognize that the “seminar in feminist criticism” at Yale was actually a seminar on women’s writing and feminist theory at Columbia that I had taught several times with my friend and mentor Carolyn Heilbrun. Carolyn and I had been literarily fused into one “well-padded,

grayish,” generic feminist professor: Anna Castleton. I remembered this scene with absolute clarity, because I had been a spectator to it. Carolyn was the Woolf expert, and in our alternation I naturally deferred to her authority. I too watched and waited as Carolyn gave her response. “The other women in the class,” the narrator continues, “all turned to catch my reaction. I felt as if I had been electrocuted on a television game show” (33).

Now Carolyn/Castleton had not said, “You’re wrong,” in anger, or even theatrically, like a game show announcer. But she had said it, and the words echoed in the seminar room on the sixth floor of Philosophy Hall, a wood-paneled room hung with the portraits of famous dead male professors of English. She had said it not so differently from the way my thesis director in the French department on the fifth floor of Philosophy Hall used to interrupt students making presentations after a few words if they were not to his liking: “*Non*,” he would say, “no.” Sometimes the student would leave the classroom in tears. Once, when I criticized him for the way he treated students in his seminar, he said, “This is not a charitable institution.” Like Virginia Woolf’s angry professor in *A Room of One’s Own*, the man saw no need to apologize.

Hold on. How can I even put the feminist and the patriarch together in the same sentence? The patriarchal professor’s explanation typically would compare the student’s inadequate analysis to his own masterful theory of the literary text, to the one correct reading, as he saw it. With my friend and colleague, a recognized authority on Virginia Woolf’s writing, the explanation was couched in feminist terms, referring to theories of gender and power. The student, she explained, as the narrator tells it, “had fallen prey to a traditional male put-down: placing women in the category of weak, dreamy mystics and then denying them power” (33). Soon after this episode, which leaves her perplexed and demoralized, Cora gives up on graduate school and returns to live in New York.

Why revisit that story now? A story that at the time I prayed no one I knew would see, or if they did, would think, as I had, that Anna Castleton taught at Yale. Rereading the tale as I thought about the question of feminist pedagogy, what surprised me was how little feminist criticism—or, as it is referred to in the *New Yorker*’s online abstract, “feminine criticism”—how little the classroom scene had to do with the story’s arc, which mainly turned on the heroine’s decision to return to New York and not marry a kind of strange slacker guy, hence the title “Engagements.” After her disappointing semester at Yale, Cora temporarily lives with her mother, as she tries to figure out what to do next.

In 1985, when I finished reading the story, I called Carolyn at her country house in the Berkshires. She had not seen it; she was cynical about the *New Yorker*, the few women they published. She was sure I was overreacting and even chuckled a bit as she recalled the seminar moment. Naturally, that was not how she saw the matter at all, though the report had definitely irritated her. Her comments were meant to be instructive, to expose the ideological foundations of the framework the student had chosen to support her interpretation. Her intent was to help the young woman understand the presuppositions that had led her to an erroneous view of Virginia Woolf. If the student was devastated by what she experienced as a feminist put-down, by what she perceived to be an unfair exertion of authority, that was because she wasn't sufficiently tough-minded. Besides, it was just a story, a *New Yorker* story at that, why take it so seriously? Being reminded that I had succumbed to the perils of the referential fallacy was no help at all.

Mean as Janowitz's story was (and it has not stopped, despite the passage of time, feeling very mean), I found that I could not so easily dismiss its portrayals. In real life were we feminist professors nobler than the author had made us out to be? The student who had given the report in the seminar didn't think so, and Janowitz had defended her with the tools of her trade: in print. Maybe we were even. But surely that's the wrong metaphor: keeping score. Still, if it's easy to see what is not feminist in a professor's "You're wrong!," what would be the better way to perform a critique when a critique is what seems called for? And aren't there times when to say "You're wrong!" is what needs saying?

At a recent tribute to Tillie Olsen, organized by the Feminist Press, Olsen's youngest daughter, Laurie, evoked an episode from her mother's life. While a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge, Olsen attended a lecture given at her daughter's high school during parents' weekend. Inspired by his reading of *The Lord of the Flies*, John Kenneth Galbraith, then professor of economics at Harvard, was holding forth on the lessons of the novel, concluding that "human beings by nature are wired to be individualistic, and to crush those in the way as they strive to get to the top of the heap and to look out for themselves." At this point, Laurie Olsen described her mother rising from the audience, interrupting the speaker's peroration to declare in a voice that echoed throughout the room, "You are wrong, sir!"

Olsen, in her daughter's words, then proceeded to put forward her own countervision of humanity. "Have you never observed young children when they hear another child cry? Have you never seen them reach out to comfort each other? That impulse," she went on to explain, "to feel and

respond to another's pain is one of the deepest human impulses, wired into the human spirit. The room was stunned," the daughter recalled, "as Tillie continued for some time." After the lecture many women came up to her mother "with tears in their eyes." Olsen never feared identifying injustice, her daughter concluded, protesting what was wrong.

What's the difference between Tillie Olsen's interrupting Galbraith to set the record straight and Carolyn Heilbrun's saying (Heilbrun also often spoke out against injustice, especially toward women), "You are wrong," to the student in her seminar? Is it as easy as concluding that it's OK for a woman to tell a man, a figure of authority, that he is wrong, to speak truth to power, but not for a woman professor to tell a woman student that the student is wrong? Or not for a feminist professor to say that to a feminist student? It has happened to me, as to all of us, that it sometimes becomes necessary to convey that something indeed is wrong. What options do we have in those circumstances, which are, after all, matters of interpretation?

I recently taught a seminar called *The Ethnic I*, in which we read first-person fiction and nonfiction works from the early twentieth century to the present, by authors of Asian, Jewish, and Latino/Latina origins. We began with an autobiography from 1912, *The Promised Land*, by Mary Antin. Her best-selling autobiography is often considered to be the first true account of the Eastern European immigrant experience in America. She emigrated from Russia in 1894, and her family settled in Boston. In *The Promised Land*, Antin tells a story that in its broadest outlines conforms to the classic arc of immigrant literature, of the narrator's transformation from immigrant to citizen through the education plot, of success in school leading to success in the wider world. Hers is a story of vocation in which she becomes a writer through her belief in the ideals of American democracy. Her hero was George Washington.

In the session devoted to *The Promised Land*, which was our first text for the semester, one student analyzed a passage that had bothered her. Antin recalls being bullied as a child by a boy "who was the torment of the neighborhood." Her father, she explains, proudly, "determined to teach the rascal a lesson for once, had him arrested and brought to court. The boy was locked up overnight, and he emerged from his brief imprisonment with a respect for the rights and persons of his neighbors" (203). For Antin, the "moral of the incident" was not her revenge on the bully but what she "saw of the way in which justice was actually administered in the United States." This was the opposite of what might have happened in Russia, she explains, if a Jew sought justice against his attacker.

In America—she continues, educating her American reader—the “evil-doer was actually punished, and not the victim, as might easily happen in a similar case in Russia.” And she sums up the occasion with a patriotic salute to her new country, “three cheers for the Red, White, and Blue!” (203–04).

Why did the student select this episode for commentary? She chose the passage, she said, because something about the language of Antin’s characterization made the student pause as a reader. The bully is described as a “great, hulky colored boy,” the two groups who attend the trial as two mirrored communities defined through metonymy by physical differences: “bearded Arlington Street against wool-headed Arlington Street” (204). The student, whose comments were thoughtful, nuanced, and historically astute, brought the scene with all its problems of representation to the class, because what felt like unconscious racism on the part of the author left her as a twenty-first-century reader feeling, as she nicely put it, “unsettled.” In my rereading of the autobiography, I had been bothered by the passage myself—so bothered, in fact, that I inadvertently changed the adjective “hulky” (a strange-sounding adjective in English; “hulking” would have been more expected) to “husky” when I responded to the student’s presentation. In my eagerness to find something “wrong” with the student’s analysis, to quell my own discomfort, I had stumbled over the signifier. In Antin’s narrative of childhood lessons in American democracy, I insisted, after admitting my mistake and trying to turn it to my advantage, what matters is size: Antin is a little girl; the bully is a big, *bulking* boy. It’s anachronistic to accuse Antin of racism, I argued, hoping to settle the matter with history. (Of course, it was in fact the oddity of the signifier that caused both of us to pause, as my earliest training as a structuralist had taught me, but to make that case seemed just as anachronistic.)

Now this is not a case where the student was wrong, either in her choice or in her interpretation. On the contrary. If anyone was wrong, I was. But I cite this example to invoke another kind of seminar interaction. As the professor who had chosen the reading, I wanted to justify Antin, so that she would not be considered wrong in the eyes of the students. I showed the class how later in the chapter she refers to a “Chinky Chinaman” (though there Antin herself places scare quotes around the phrase to indicate the language of her group of girlfriends [204]). I desperately wanted to make the case for a historicized reading of racialized stereotypes, of language we no longer considered acceptable. Didn’t Fitzgerald and Hemingway refer to “kikes” without anyone’s impugning their integrity as writers?<sup>3</sup> I didn’t want this linguistic bump to ruin my author’s reputation. I wanted to



erase what was making me uncomfortable in my own eyes and perhaps also implicating me, who had assigned the text, as sharing Antin's unconscious racial bias. I too descend from Russian Jewish immigrants, and racism is not what I want my legacy to include.<sup>4</sup>

Let me use the question of anxiety and discomfort to move back to the earlier question my anecdotes raised: How as teachers and students can we learn to respond to what's wrong—what feels wrong—without recourse to a rhetoric of blame, without sending the offender to jail for the night? How can we tolerate disagreement among ourselves, particularly when, which is usually the case in the humanities, right and wrong are often a matter of interpretation and just as often of politics? What would make it possible for us to occupy the same space, acknowledging our differences and disagreements but without policing one another?

Here, therefore, though it may seem paradoxical, I return to the work of Carolyn Heilbrun, who wrote poignantly about what connects and separates women, about the need for justice, and about the difficulty of taking feminist positions in postfeminist times.<sup>5</sup>

This essay will appear soon after the fifth anniversary of Heilbrun's suicide. What I most want now to say to my friend is, "You are wrong!" There are always many reasons—or feelings translated into reasons—that lead people to suicide. One cause of Carolyn's published despair was the difficulty of continuing to be a feminist teacher, an older feminist teacher to younger feminists. She was often discouraged by the women students who thought feminism was over, that the battles were won, that they had heard it all before. This was the theme of one of her last books, *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold*. Oddly, this was also a book in which she put forward one of her boldest and potentially most optimistic ideas: that of liminality, a concept borrowed from the great anthropologist Victor Turner. Heilbrun writes:

The word "limen" means "threshold," and to be in a state of liminality is to be poised on uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another. But the most salient form of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing. (3)

Liminality is a good description of what it means to be a graduate student, like Janowitz's protagonist, Cora. "Liminal entities," Turner observes, "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between . . ." (qtd. in Heilbrun 36). Liminality, another Turner proponent puts it, helps women "find viable alternatives to patriarchy" (Driver qtd. in Heilbrun 37). But Cora

doesn't stick around long enough to figure out what might emerge from the lack of clarity.

In the penultimate episode of "Engagements," Cora goes shopping with her mother on Thirty-Fourth Street. She has just had an unsettling encounter with Ray, who told her he's getting married to another woman. As consolation, though Cora professes not to really care about the wedding announcement, her mother buys her two pairs of shoes, "gray pumps, with a medium heel, and a pair of purple sandals, which resembled, at least as far as I was concerned, those worn by French prostitutes. They weren't practical," she observes of the sandals, "but I liked them" (Janowitz 38). Cora implicitly dismisses the "gray pumps" as she rejects her gray feminist professor, preferring, as stereotypes go, the sandals of a French prostitute. There's a lot to be said about the therapeutics of shoe shopping, but that's not where I want to end.

I turn for a final image to Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, written during World War II and published after her suicide. The thread I want to pull out is the portrait of Miss La Trobe, the author of a play whose performance is at the center of the novel. La Trobe is a middle-aged woman described in terms that Carolyn enjoyed because they rejected stereotypes of gender and especially of female beauty: "Very little was actually known about her," Woolf writes. "Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language—perhaps, then, she wasn't altogether a lady? At any rate, she had a passion for getting things up" (58). One of the main things Miss La Trobe gets up is the play, whose meaning baffles the audience. Mr. Streatfield, the minister, tries to sort out the confusion: "To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole. . . . We act different parts; but are the same. That I leave to you" (192). The audience struggles to understand: "He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that's the question! And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play?" (200). As a title, *Between the Acts* points to the condition of liminality and to the entanglement of contradiction that comes from being betwixt and between: "It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted" (215). Yes and no coexist in the liminal world. A no doesn't mean a yes can't come later; a yes is always only provisional.

The professor Heilbrun evokes at the end of her book is an aging feminist faced with young women students who do not see the world as she does. I have felt this myself at times, the loneliness of being the one in the

“gray pumps with the medium heels” watching the girls in purple sandals go dancing. But the one thing that Heilbrun does not imagine here is the possibility of change coming from the very terms of her analysis of the threshold: in the provisional suspension of codes and conventions that liminality entails, feminist genealogy might evolve differently. Change and continuity could emerge simultaneously through the movement of a feedback loop, in which, for instance, students and teachers alike resist the need for certainty, for being right.

The liminal, as Turner has shown, is often the site and the occasion for a rite of passage, a ritual attended by witnesses. That would be another way to understand the dynamics of the graduate seminar. For each student, the oral report is a rite of passage witnessed by fellow participants. The performance of the student is not solely a pas de deux with the teacher. Rather, the presentation, like any rite, makes sense within a collective frame. “In this view,” writes another commentator on liminality, “life is a series of individual passages from group to group, while the groups [of witnesses] . . . remain stable, like standing waves” (Beels 121). What happens in these rites can be unsettling. “Transformations occur in this in-between space,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes, a threshold space where we are in a “constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling” (Anzaldúa and Keating 1).

In the liminal classroom—a space that Heilbrun anticipates when she concludes her argument with a metaphor reminiscent of Woolf’s—we are no longer actors in a “carefully structured drama, a play in which our parts are written for us” (102). Rather, we become performers in a space of invention and tolerance for the alarming, in which, for instance, a student presentation like Cora’s would lead to flashes of electricity, and not electrocution, to the illumination of another way—other ways—of thinking.

After the audience disperses, Miss La Trobe ponders the play’s reception: “A failure,’ she groaned” (209). But Woolf does not leave her author in despair. As night begins to fall, Miss La Trobe is on the move: “She took her voyage away from the shore, and, raising her hand, fumbled for the latch of the iron entrance gate” (211). She finds herself at the “threshold, . . . the place where as women and creators of literature,” as Heilbrun puts it, unconsciously, perhaps, reprising Woolf’s final vision in the novel, “we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays” (102). At the end of *Between the Acts*, lonely, but not bereft, Miss La Trobe proceeds into a pub, orders a drink, and listens to the words circulating around her. As she listens, new words of her own form in her head, the dialogue of her next play.

## NOTES

This essay was originally presented at the Second Feminist Pedagogy Conference 2007, called “What’s Feminist about Feminist Pedagogy?” (Oct. 2007). The conference was organized by Jen Gieseck, Antonia Levy, and Jennifer Gaboury, students in environmental psychology, sociology, and political science at the Graduate Center, CUNY. I am grateful in particular to Gieseck, who invited me to speak at this student-organized occasion. I’d also like to thank two of my former students, Kevin Ferguson and Victoria Rosner, for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay, as well as the students in The Ethnic I seminar at the Graduate Center for the example of their practice.

1. Clearly, this conference was, as Jane Gallop suggests, a “memorable” moment in the history of feminist criticism (186). For me it was memorably contentious.

2. I published the final version of this paper as “Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader” in *Subject to Change* (102–21).

3. The very next week we read *The Great Gatsby*, where “kyke” appears in the mouth of Mrs. McKee (38) but, more interesting, where Tom Buchanan objects to Daisy’s use of “hulking”: “a great big hulking physical specimen of a . . .” Tom replies, “I hate that word hulking, . . . even in kidding” (16).

4. When I showed this essay to the student who had made the Antin presentation, she told me that she in fact had shared my anxiety about the passage because she shared my background. In class, on the basis of assumptions I had made about her name, Jessica Wells Cantiello, it did not occur to me that her discomfort with the text might have common roots with my own.

5. The emergence of a so-called postfeminist generation was already being diagnosed in 1982, just as I was starting to run the Women’s Studies Program at Barnard (see Bolotin).

## WORKS CITED

- Antin, Mary. *The Promised Land*. New York: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, and Annalouise Keating, eds. *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Beels, C. Christian. *A Different Story: The Rise of Narrative in Psychotherapy*. Phoenix: Zeig, 2001. Print.
- Bolotin, Susan. “Voices from the Post-feminist Generation.” *New York Times* 17 Oct. 1982: 28+. Print.
- “The Feminist Politics of Interpretation.” *Feminism / Theory / Politics*. Conf. Pembroke Center, Brown U. Mar. 1985. Addresses.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Simon, 1995. Print.
- Gallop, Jane. “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading.” *Profession* (2007): 181–86. Print.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Women’s Lives: The View from the Threshold*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999. Print.
- Janowitz, Tama. “Engagements.” *New Yorker* 2 Sept. 1985: 30–38. Print.

- Miller, Nancy K. *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. Print.
- Olsen, Laurie. "A Memorial Tribute to Tillie Olsen." 11 Sept. 2007. *Audio Archive*. Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, CUNY. Web. 20 June 2008.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. New York: Harcourt, 1969. Print.